

Farm bill could give boost to Florida agriculture

Citrus and other state crops would get a big share of federal farming funds.

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The big federal dollars for farm crops have always gone to corn, wheat and soybeans, while fruit and vegetables — crops Florida produces a lot of — get zilch. That may change soon. Under legislation recently introduced, specialty crops such as citrus, strawberries, tomatoes and tree nuts would get a big share of the money allocated by the federal farm bill.

Industry officials say it is a major change in farm policy that is long overdue.

Specialty crops, which account for half of the nation's farm income, have consistently been pushed aside by the farm bill, receiving little or no funding. The so-called program crops -- corn, wheat, soybeans, rice and cotton -- are used to make products ranging from fabrics to animal feed and get the bulk of federal support.

But the farm bill, which expires in September, is being reworked by Congress to stress the importance of fruit and vegetables and healthy eating.

"We're actually getting a seat at the table," said Florida Citrus Mutual Chief Executive Officer Michael Sparks. "In the past, we were not able to participate in the program."

The bill would provide Florida, the nation's second-largest producer of fruit and vegetables behind California, the same level of assistance other farm states have long enjoyed, Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson said.

The legislation "elevates the status of Florida's agriculture industry," Bronson said. But the \$2 billion proposal would not provide the direct subsidies the program crops receive. The bill aims to boost fruit and vegetable production by increasing exports through marketing efforts and expanding research into disease and pest control. What's more, the bill would require the purchase of more fruits and vegetables for school lunch programs.

Florida's citrus industry would benefit from the additional research money, which would be used to prevent the spread of canker and greening, Sparks said. The research could be vital in restoring volumes lost to disease and hurricanes.

Competing for consumers

The bill also attempts to boost the sale of U.S. fruit and vegetables in export markets. It would provide \$350 million a year to pay for overseas advertising and marketing for U.S. fruit and vegetables. The increased marketing could increase the demand for Florida citrus in countries such as Japan, where Florida grapefruit is growing in popularity.

"The Japanese consume more Florida grapefruit than the United States," Sparks said. "Through marketing programs, we were able to develop a market for fresh grapefruit."

The potential to boost demand for Florida orange juice in markets abroad is significant, Sparks said. In the United States, each person drinks an average of 5.5 to 6 gallons of orange juice each year.

"Other countries don't consume even half as much," Sparks said. "Activities that would raise that consumption to our level would be a real benefit to Florida citrus growers."

The legislation filed last month by House Democrats and Republicans, including U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam, R-Bartow, is similar to a proposal made weeks earlier by U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns.

In that plan, almost \$5 billion would be devoted to increasing the production and consumption of U.S. fruit and vegetables and improving the industry's ability to compete in the marketplace.

"There's a growing realization that the farm bill should be more reflective of the diversity of crops grown in the United States as opposed to five or six grain commodities," Putnam said. "There appears to be a level of support that's reaching critical mass."

Both the USDA proposal and the House bill call for increasing federal purchases for school lunch and breakfast programs to combat obesity and other health issues. The USDA plan would pump \$500 million over 10 years into those programs.

Pros and cons

The proposals also allow specialty crop growers to participate in conservation programs that have long been reserved for program crops. It's another

opportunity for many Florida farmers, whose properties back up to wetlands, Sparks said.

The House bill calls for a \$500 million-a-year program for specialty crop block grants paid to states based on their level of fruit and vegetable production. Under that program, Florida would get the second-biggest share behind California.

Perhaps the most controversial proposal is the USDA's plan to lift a ban on fruit and vegetable production by farmers who receive subsidies for program crops.

Some groups, including the Western Growers Association, say lifting the ban would give program crop farmers an unfair advantage over farmers who now grow specialty crops.

"All growers should be competing in the marketplace on a level playing field," Western Growers said in a news release.

Lisa Lochridge, a spokeswoman for the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, said a study commissioned by the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance found that lifting the ban on program crop farmers would lower profits for existing specialty crop growers.

The proposal would cost specialty crop growers about \$4 billion a year, the study found.